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SUBJECT: Latvia: Special Media Reaction on Latvia's Decision to Accept Guantanamo Detainee

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¶1. Summary: Press coverage of the Latvian Government's decision to accept a former Guantanamo detainee has been extensive, largely factual, and consistent with both Latvian and U.S. Government statements on the issue, despite some sarcastic commentary in Russian-language newspapers. Editorial comments have cast the decision as a pragmatic move to cooperate with the United States. Both Russian and Latvian-language papers have reported on the Government's announcement that the detainee would like to learn the Latvian language. Some Russian media sources have used a negative tone in reporting that the detainee will receive financial support from the United States. End summary.

¶2. Key Headlines:

-- Latvian-language centrist Diena (front page): "U.S. Prisoner Liberated for Life in Latvia."

-- Latvian-language center-left Neatkariga Rita Avize (front page, continued on inside page): "Controversial Solidarity with the United States: To Show Solidarity with the United States, We Will Accept A Former Inmate."

-- Latvian-language right wing Latvijas Avize (inside page): "Prisoner comes," "Guantanamo Inmate Will Live in Latvia," and "Modern Day Gulag?"

-- Russian-language centrist Telegraf (inside page): "Guantanamo Inmate Might Become a Citizen."

-- Russian-language center-left Chas (inside page): "Obama: You've Got a Present from Guantanamo."

-- Russian-language leftist Vesti Sevodnya (inside page): "Welcome!" (Written in Latvian)

¶3. Press Coverage (chronological from latest):

Press coverage of the Latvian Government's decision to accept a former Guantanamo detainee was extensive, largely factual, and consistent with both Latvian and U.S. Government statements on the issue, despite some sarcastic commentary in the Russian-language newspapers. The centrist daily, Diena, local television stations, and the Russian-language newspapers Chas and Telegraf ran factual stories consistent with information provided by the Latvian Government. The stories centered largely on the detainee's origins, background, and plans for integration into Latvian society.

-- Latvijas Avize, one of Latvia's most widely-circulated dailies, editorialized that the significance of accepting the detainee should not be overly exaggerated. The paper asserted that the decision was comparable to sending troops to Iraq and Afghanistan, and should be looked upon as a foreign policy issue. The author remarked that relations between Latvia and the United States have changed since President Obama took office, but not as drastically as some might worry. The paper opined that accepting this "victim" of the war on terrorism is not as troublesome as rumors about secret CIA prisons in Lithuania.

-- The widely-circulated, sensationalist Russian-language newspaper Vesti Sevodnya ran a story under the headline "Laipni Ludzam" - a Latvian phrase meaning "Welcome". The article focused heavily on the Government's announcement that the detainee would learn the Latvian language and would receive financial support from the United States. The newspaper, which is often concerned with the rights of non-citizens in Latvia, notes with sarcasm that the Guantanamo detainee will be more privileged than Latvia's non-citizen residents (typically ethnic Russians), since he will be receiving relocation expenses and other monthly benefits, including medical care.

¶4. Comments by Experts:

-- A Positive Signal to the United States that Latvia is willing to "help"

In an interview with the U.S. based publication, Politico, the Latvian Ambassador to the United States said that the decision was made in order to "send a signal that Latvia supports the decision to close the base" and to "help the administration of President Obama to deal with this complicated issue." According to a Former Director of the Latvian Foreign Policy Institute, Atis Leijins, the move "represents the country's readiness to help the United States" after the United States has provided "assistance to Latvia" for many years. Likewise, former Latvian Ambassador to the United States Ojars Kalnins told the national news agency LETA that Latvia "and other European countries are trying to help the Americans."

-- Commitment to the European Union

University of Latvia political scientist Zhaneta Ozolina told the online portal Delfi that since the "EU criticized human rights violations at Guantanamo prison," Latvia and other EU Member States "should take some responsibility." Former Foreign Minister and current Parliamentarian Artis Pabriks told the portal that Latvia had to be prepared to take such a step, "if we have already supported a common EU position." Political Scientist Daina Bleiere

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believes that the move reflects "international solidarity and support of the U.S. administration's efforts to prevent human rights violations occurring at Guantanamo prison."

-- Implications for National Security

Ozolina noted that while the detainee's connection to terrorism has not been proven, his admission to Latvia will "create a new and complex situation." The detainee's presence will force people to "wake up and think about security," said Leijins. According to Bleire, if no evidence of the individual's involvement in terrorism has been found in five years, there should be no "negative effect on national security."

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